

CFAC offers to test wells

By **RICHARD HANNERS** Hungry Horse News | Posted: Wednesday, April 29, 2015 8:57 am

Property owners near the closed Columbia Falls Aluminum Co. smelter plant could get free well testing for a year, according to a recent letter sent by Steve Wright, CFAC's environmental manager.

Wright told a homeowner north of Aluminum Drive that the company had offered to conduct free well testing for a community well group in Aluminum City and wanted to extend the offer to others.

"CFAC proposes to have a consultant, Hydrometrics, sample the 20 wells that were sampled by (the Environmental Protection Agency) in 2013 and 2014 per quarter in the Aluminum City neighborhood for the next year," Wright said. "We could begin this effort in May 2015, with quarterly sampling to follow."

Wright said that sampling every three months would provide data on a seasonal basis.

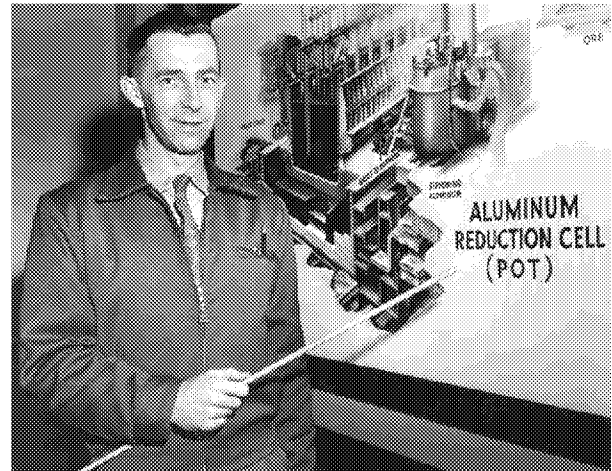
"The consultant will analyze the water samples for cyanide and fluoride, the compounds of concern from aluminum reduction works," Wright said.

The offer to the community group in Aluminum City that Wright referred to came after Nino Berube wrote to Glencore, CFAC's owner, on March 23 as president of the Gladow Mutual Pump Homeowners association — eight families that share a common well.

Berube, who worked as an engineer at the aluminum plant from 1979 to 2003, told the Hungry Horse News he was quite surprised that Glencore had responded to his letter.

"The letter was sent following an annual homeowners meeting to express our disappointment that Glencore hadn't done anything after cyanide was detected in a residential well in September 2013," he said. "We really didn't expect a response, based on their history with the community."

In his March 23 letter, Berube said members at the meeting felt strongly that, contrary to the company's public statements and media accounts, an underground plume of contamination had left the CFAC site.



Complex chemistry

About 90 foremen, technicians and supervisors at the Anaconda Aluminum Co. plant learned about aluminum production in 1957-1958 from instructors like Lars Ryssdal. Mel Ruder photo

“Some families within our water distribution network and those within nearby distribution systems are afraid to drink the well water and have switched to bottled water for their family drinking supplies,” he wrote.

The detection of cyanide in September 2013 “has caused both physical and mental trauma for your neighbors already, and will eventually cause great personal financial damage when property values start to plummet,” his letter said.

The homeowners group was particularly upset that the cyanide detection “should have set off alarm bells within the company leadership,” but 16 months had gone by and they had not heard anything from Glencore or CFAC, his letter said.

“Why management has done nothing to mitigate the potentially large financial impacts and horrible publicity this type of pollution event brings to corporations is hard for us to understand,” Berube wrote.

After learning about CFAC’s offer to conduct free well sampling for the homeowners association in an April 15 letter, Berube wrote back on April 18. He explained that he had “worked hard to go over the data with the other families so they understand that the cyanide and fluoride are currently below acceptable values in the drinking water standards.”

But the homeowners were concerned about the future and wanted more than just one year of sampling. Berube told CFAC they would accept the one-year sampling offer, but they also wanted Glencore and CFAC to do something about the contamination at the plant.

“Please stop trying to spin your side of the story and mitigate the pollution on your site,” Berube wrote back. “We are not traumatized by EPA sampling our wells. It is the pollution you are putting into the groundwater that is causing our problems.”

Berube’s letters were also sent to the city of Columbia Falls, Flathead County commissioners, Gov. Steve Bullock, Sens. Jon Tester and Steve Daines, and Rep. Ryan Zinke.

According to Rob Parker, a site assessment manager at the EPA’s Region 8 office in Denver, EPA re-sampled 20 residential wells near the plant twice in 2014 and were unable to detect cyanide.